

Chapter 9

Talitha suddenly brought her horse to a dead stop, whirled it about, and rode pell-mell down the trail from where we had just come. I tried to follow suit, but rough hands grabbed my bridle, while others hauled me from the saddle. There were shouts and, I assumed, curses, in a language I did not understand. I prayed Talitha would get safely away; I heard hooves pounding down the trail after her, even as I was shoved roughly to the ground. My hands were tied deftly behind me, and I was rolled over to look up into an ugly, brutalized face. The man snarled something to me, which I didn't understand. When I didn't answer, he slapped my face hard, and repeated what he had just said.

In Korei, I said, "Please, I don't understand."

He started, and said, in the same tongue, "Korei! You don't look like them, but you're dressed that way. Why are you out here, boy?"

I gave a silent prayer of thanks to God; he thought I was a boy! That wouldn't last very long if they ever removed my shirt; I wasn't well endowed, like Talitha, but I would never pass for a boy then.

"Please, sir, we are fleeing from the Korei, who want to kill us."

That was true, as far as it went. I hoped the Lord would forgive me yet another deceit.

"And just why would they want to kill two fresh-faced boys just out of diapers?"

"We insulted their gods," I said, also truthfully. "We are of Tirzah."

The man's eyes glinted. "Tirzah, huh? I know of someone who would pay a bundle for the two of you, once we catch the other one."

He raised his face from mine, and turned toward the knot of men milling around us. He spoke still in Korei. "Nociar! Come here, brat!"

A slender man, probably in his mid twenties, came and stood beside the other. His face had a cunning expression that made me even more uneasy than the open brutality of the other.

"Yes, Demetrius? Why are you speaking in Korei?"

"Master, to you," the other said, kicking the younger man hard in the shins.

A wave of rage, instantly suppressed, passed over his face, and he said, in a shaky voice, "Yes, Master?"

"This boy here says he's running from the Korei, and comes from Tirzah. You're from there, so ask her something in that language."

He looked appraisingly at me, suspicion in his eyes, and said, in the tongue of Tirzah, "Do you worship the Great Bear?"

I replied, in the same language, "I worship no man, but the true and only God, and his Son, Jesus Christ."

He laughed, a nasty laugh, and said, in Korei once more, "He's from Tirzah, all right. Probably got chased out of there, too."

I wondered that he didn't mention I was a Christian, unless withholding that information served some private purpose of his. Despite his outward bravado, I sensed there was still something in him that could be redeemed; the other man, Demetrius was pure evil, and beyond the pale.

Demetrius said something to Nociar in his own language, then turned his attention back to the rest of the men around us. Nociar remained with me. He grabbed my shoulder, and pulled me roughly to my feet.

Speaking to me in our native tongue, he said, "Don't try to run off. You wouldn't get far. As long as you're a good boy, your feet won't be bound. You're such a pretty boy, I wonder someone doesn't want to take you to bed like a girl."

He must have seen my face pale at that, because he laughed in that same ugly way as before. "Don't worry, little boy. Demetrius plans to sell you in the slave market, and you won't fetch a good price if you're damaged goods. Come on, I'll tie you to your horse. Demetrius wants me to take you back to our camp."

The camp was several miles away, he said, over rough terrain, and it would take us a couple of hours to get there. This country was dry and barren, quite a contrast to the lush green of the Mardath. We had left the Mardath three days before, climbing steadily for the first two, once we found a road going south. The landscape changed gradually from green to brown, and the trees thinned out until they were almost gone altogether. In their place, scrub, brush, and weeds dotted the landscape. Yesterday, we entered this land of rocks and canyons, and it was in one of the narrow defiles that the outlaws had ambushed us. I wondered that they had enough traffic in this desolate area to sustain themselves; I learned later that travelers mostly came to this area out of the east. We just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time, when they were returning from an unsuccessful raid.

Nociar said little for much of the way back to the outlaw camp. After about an hour, he dropped his horse back beside mine; he had been leading with a rope attached to my horse.

"I've heard about this god called Jesus," he said. "What's that all about?"

My heart leapt within me. The Lord had just presented me with an open door.

"We believe that there is only one God, who made the heavens and the earth. Man rebelled against God, and we are all born in sin. God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins, that we might be restored to the Father, and have the promise of everlasting life."

Nociar sneered again, but his eyes betrayed an interest his face tried to deny. "Just what the world needs; another set of gods."

I changed the subject, hoping to disarm the defenses he had set up. "How did you come to be here, so far from Tirzah?"

Anger replaced the sneer on his face. "My father angered the Great Bear, by looking when he shouldn't have. He was executed, and my mother and I barely escaped with our lives. She died on the plans of the Kore, trying to save me. I spent five years among the

Korei, until some merchant from Tirzah helped me escape. Demetrius found me wandering in the badlands four years ago, and for whatever reason, didn't cut my throat.

“By the cut of your clothes, and the design on your shirt, I'd say you were with the Horse-Eaters. I was captured by the Grass Weavers.”

My heart was racing. “This merchant – was he a short, fat man?”

He looked at me with renewed suspicion. “Yes -- what of it? Is he someone you knew?”

“Was his name Portius?”

“Yes, that sounds right.”

“He is – was – my father.”

His mouth dropped open in astonishment. “You – he – he's dead then?”

My eyes filled with tears. “He died helping me escape from the Korei.”

He brought both our horses to a halt. “I promised him if ever I got a chance to repay... Quick, we have to get out of here.”

He took a knife from his belt, and quickly cut my bonds, then loosened the rope attached to my horse. “Follow me, and don't ask questions.”

Just ahead of us, the trail we were following forked, the path on the right going north, and the other winding to the southwest. We went left, and beckoning me to follow, Nociar set his horse to a fast canter. The ground was still rough and uneven; going any faster would have been a sure recipe for disaster. We went along this trail for about an hour, down into yet another canyon and back out again. When we came out of the canyon, Nociar doubled back along the rim until he came to another trail, this one going almost due south. From time to time, he looked anxiously back over his shoulder, and sometimes stopped and cocked his ear to listen.

Towards sundown, we stopped and let the horses rest, near a small stream coursing out from among the rocks. I drank my first water since that morning, surprised at how thirsty I was. My canteen had sat on my saddle unopened.

We stayed near the stream, where there was a little grass for the horses, until the moon rose, then we set out again. Nociar was silent during our stop, and only grunted when I asked him a question. He was deeply preoccupied, and obviously concerned about pursuit. All through the day's journey, I gave thanks to God for his deliverance, and prayed that I might be able to witness to this young man. The Lord had great plans for him, I was sure.

When the moon was well down on its descent to the east, Nociar finally felt safe enough to stop for the night. Toughened as I was by weeks of hardship, I was still weary, and realized with a start I hadn't eaten anything since early in the morning. The Lord had sustained me. Our supplies of meat and bread and long since run out; we sustained ourselves with whatever game we came across, including rodents and snakes. The Korei turned up their noses at nothing that moved, including locusts and grubs.

Without speaking, Nociar rummaged in his saddle bag, and extracted some dried meat and coarse bread, which he shared with me. I washed it down with a little water from my canteen; it was delicious at that moment.

Nociar set up camp under an overhang, after tethering the horses nearby. It would be a dry camp, as there was no water around. We were hidden away from prying eyes enough to risk a fire, which lent a little cheer to the dreary place we had found. Once we settled by the fire, and I sat gazing into it, Nociar moved a little too close to me for comfort. His voice had an odd note about it.

“I noticed you’re awfully shy about doing your business for a boy. I’ve been watching you. I wonder if you’re really a boy at all.”

With that, he reached out, and squeezed my chest, through my shirt. I gasped in shock and pain, and he responded with that evil laugh I had come to detest so much. When he didn’t remove his hand, I reached up and pulled it away.

“Nociar, please. What about the debt you owe my father?”

He snatched his hand away from mine. “I saved your life from those outlaws, didn’t I? I think I deserve a little reward, too.”

Nonetheless, he rose to his feet, and walked outside of the little cave we were in. When he returned, he sat on the opposite side of the fire from me. He didn’t come near me again, and I finally felt secure enough to unroll my bedroll, and settle down for the night. My last thoughts were for Talitha; I felt peace in my spirit about her. I was sure she had escaped safely. She could take care of herself out in this wilderness.

The next morning, Nociar was more civil, acting as if nothing at all had happened the night before. After we had eaten a meager breakfast, we saddled the horses. As we mounted up, he said, “We’re out of the territory run by Demetrius’s gang, but there’s a rival gang in this area. It’s run by character named Cornelius, no sweetheart but not as bad as Demetrius. We want to avoid the skyline, and to stay off the main trails. I’m not as familiar with this country, but I think I can find my way out. We need to head for Kirjath, a big city south of the badlands. The Romans rule there, and we should be able to lose ourselves in the streets.”

I had heard of the Romans, because they were the ones who crucified our Lord. At one time, they ruled the country in the badlands, too, but decided it wasn’t worth the effort. Kirjath was the capital of the frontier territory to the south of the badlands. Somehow, I knew that something very important waited for me there, something pleasant, but great trouble as well.

I nodded, still not inclined to be polite after what had happened.. We had just left the area around the camp, and rejoined the trail south, when we heard a shout behind us.

Nociar glanced quickly around. “Demetrius! He followed us after all. We’re done for.”

I glanced back long enough to see a dozen men approaching, no more than a quarter of a mile away. We both spurred our horses, who stumbled as they lurched forward, trying to obey the urging on the rough ground underfoot. Not concerned about keeping away from the skyline now, we veered off the trail when it came out on a large mesa, and set off with all the speed our horses could muster. They were fresh, and responded eagerly. The

tough little Korei pony I rode would have surged ahead of Nociar's mount if I had let it, but I restrained it.

It occurred to me to wonder what lay on the other side of this mesa, a couple of miles away. The far edge was approaching rapidly, and there might be nothing there but a sheer drop. The outlaws behind us were shouting curses and threats, no doubt, but I understood nothing of what I heard. I began to get seriously concerned about our fate as we galloped closer to the edge of the mesa, and no means of escape from it was apparent.

Just at that moment, another group of riders appeared from in front of us, hidden from view before by a massive rock formation at the side of the mesa. There must have been thirty or forty men in this new group.

We were trapped.